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KARL BITTER: IMMIGRANT*

BY OSWALD G. VILLARD

LET us turn to the best known and least known of books; to stories of a thousand days, a thousand nights, in garden and in courtyard, in every clime, under any sun, under every moon. Nowhere, nowhere do we find a tale more stirring or more touching than ours to-night. The theme is old; in ages past genie and fairy adorned it; magic lamps illumined it; wizards' wands waved in it, yes, the spirit of stark tragedy has o'erhung it, and the wings of angels have fluttered through it long, long ere this. The wicked old king, his cruel servant, the handsome gifted youth incomparable in stature and in form who breaks intolerable bonds and crosses the seas to distant lands there to win fame and prosperity—this is the groundwork of our story. Of just such material the minnesinger spun the slight web of his fiction in every dawn of literature and the story teller of the bazaars during long ages conjured the pence out of the pockets of his squatting hearers. Yet surely never were their versions so fair and so unsullied, so compelling, so full of inspiration as ours. Let us recall it as it was.

Karl Bitter inhaled freedom of spirit with adolescence. He was early of those who stand in the market-place and stir their comrades to thought—out of full, generous hearts. He spoke from a soul born for beauty, radiant with ideals that demanded permanent expression and would not be denied—until an unnatural law of the military interfered with the law of his nature. Soon thereafter, out of the East, he stood before the imperial city of the West. Great walls it had and high; how could he scale them without name or friends or speech or means? Behold, it needed but the trump of his genius to lay them low. A short year and a half and his fame had spread among all who like himself were devoted to the cult of the beautiful. His genius, transplanted, took root like some wild plant at the edge of a swamp and grew straight up toward heaven, never ceasing to flower with greater and greater charm.

Day by day the spirit within him broadened and deepened. The very atmosphere of America, was tonic to his nature. No bonds here to constrain, no castes to fetter, no hidebound traditions in art or life to enslave, no king to bow before. This was home to him. Here was an Austrian born to be an American; in him every string was attuned to democracy; every note responded to our Republican overtones; the more he tested American liberty the freer and freer he grew. Indeed, coming from abroad with fresh eyes that looked beneath the surface he saw and felt things that were veiled to the multitude born to Americanism—precisely as did in other fields Jacob Riis and Carl Schurz before him. So it soon came to pass that Americans turned to him, the foreigner, this "Dutchman" of the East Side workshops, to interpret their Americanism, yes, even to celebrate in plastic art the triumph of an American fleet in Asiatic waters.

But far greater than this victory of our arms is the magnificent triumph of democracy, which Bitter's whole career symbolizes. He was the clearest living proof of the wonder of its ways. One can speak evil of America if one will, and sneer at the melting-pot too. One can scoff at the multitudes of immigrants who appear to the unthinking but uncouth burdens, great masses that stand wonder-eyed near the portals of the land of liberty and know not which way to turn that crave leadership yet fear to trust; and ever and anon have concealed among them some precious jewel like this, some divine human gift as their recompense to the haven of refuge that bade them come and be welcomed, rest and be free. So too Karl Bitter swung wide the gates, and he who is just must bow down and respect the nation that laid its spell upon this man, that raised him up from the struggling, unloosed his artist powers, bade him work and be free, filled his heart with love for its aims, inspired him in the twinkling of an eye with the very spirit and the majesty of its institutions. The charm of his personality, the rugged force within him, the skill of his tools carried him

*An address delivered at the Karl Bitter Memorial Meeting held May 5, 1915.

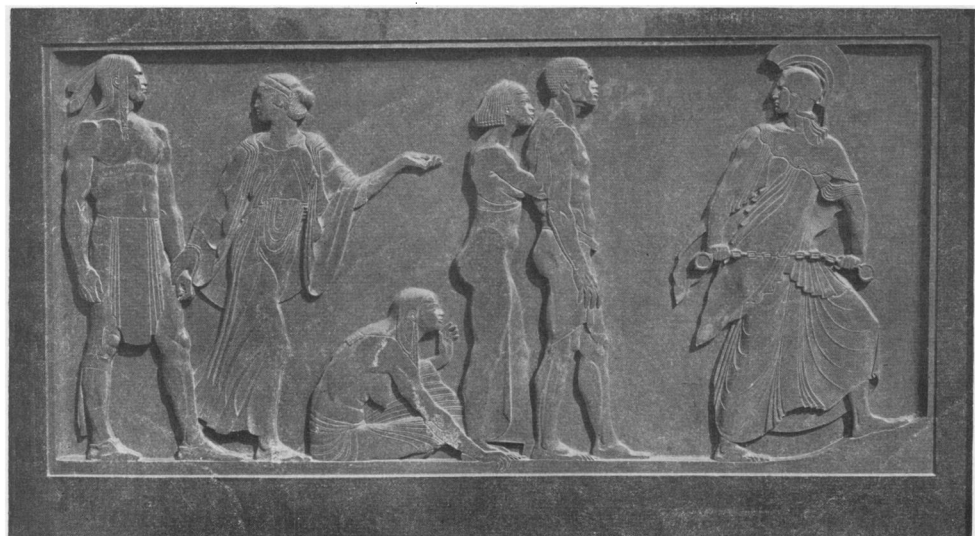


RIGHT PANEL, CARL SCHURZ MEMORIAL

KARL BITTER

through one after another of the open doors of opportunity and as he passed each door, it was ever clearer that America had made this man its own. How abundantly he repaid this confidence and trust, how warmly he appreciated the generosity of his welcome, his work attests a hundredfold. He recognized the obligations as well as the privileges of citizenship; therefore, the opportunity for public service never passed him by unheeded. For if his art was a

jealous mistress, so was his new country, which he came to adore without forgetting the love for the old. The immensity of its spaces, the vastness of its problems, the staggering importance to humanity of their proper solution—these ever impressed themselves upon his mind. It was not altogether by accident that he perched upon his enchanted Weehawken cliffs, nor was it only the beauty of the river and the vitality of its ever restless traffic, or the



LEFT PANEL, CARL SCHURZ MEMORIAL

KARL BITTER

grandeur of the sky line in the evening light that lured him back there at the end of his life to work in the open, so that when his glance rested from the figure before him, it fell upon one of the wonders of the world. Yet the visions upon which he gazed were not always those he saw, for his was the inward looking eye so often to be noticed in those whom fate has marked as its own. Beyond the city he saw the country, beyond the country, mankind. So more and more it seemed as if his work turned to the interpretation of American life as it appeared to his enthusiasm and his loyalty, reinforced by his deep reading in American history, and the writings of the Fathers. His Jefferson, Marshall and Hamilton, the Louisiana Purchase group, his Franz Sigel and Carl Schurz only an historian could tell just how much of America's past is herein expressed; but no one can fail to read in them his sincerity, the earnestness of his purpose, the idealism that ruled his gifted chisel and the knowledge it bespeaks. What wonder that his fellow-sculptors should three times have chosen him their national president? What wonder that three great American expositions should have made this Austrian chief of the Sculptors that were to interpret American progress to their hundreds of thousands of visitors or that the most characteristically American of our universities should have made him the portrayer of the rise of the Middle West and of its noble, democratic aspirations? Or that his genius should lightly have touched upon the negro problem and yet have illumined it in passing? Or that for him, the lover of his fellowmen, his finest monument of war stood not for the warrior ready for the fray, but for the war-worn citizen-soldiers returning, burdened with wounded and with great gaps in their ranks, to their waiting pathetic women and children, eager to turn again to the paths of peace, to the upbuilding of the beloved republic.

Surely the heavy hand of Destiny was early laid upon him. What seemed an irretrievable boyish misfortune proved the making of the man; his cruel military persecutor became his benefactor; his exile but a translation to unbounded opportunity and to lasting happiness. Then as if it were foreordained that the

thread of life should soon be severed, Providence crowded much into this existence. Karl Bitter has drunk deeply from the cup of success; the plaudits of the multitude had long rung in his ears; the praise of the elect had spurred him on in fullest measure to make the power, not however, to make so earnest and devoted a nature vain or proud. The admiration of his fellow craftsmen, their generous bestowal of rewards were freely his and so was the joy of serving his fellows, while unconsciously molding rare monuments to his soul in portraying the lineaments of others. He knew what it was to be a leader of men; his was the stimulating consciousness of having won by sheer merit, without favor or fawning, a place among the foremost of his time. To how very few is as much vouchsafed; how few even at three-score and ten have carved as much out of the quarry of life? And always and always the true artist was wholly subordinated to his work. His was to give, never to obtain; his genius was not for self-glorification but for the generations to come. Why weep for him? In all his life there was no single thing to depress or to pity, but everything to elate. He quickened our faith in art, in life, in our nation.

How fast our little bark slips down the river of life! Surely it was but yesterday he took his seat, so calm, so kind, so brave. How strong the paddle, how vigorous the arm, how keen the sight, how straight he went. See, others are in the rapids, some upon the rocks; this pilot knew the way, the truest course, for he took it from the stars.

On the following pages are reproductions of paintings by Gertrude Fiske, of Boston, and M. Jeane McLane (Mrs. John C. Johanson) of New York.

The painting by Miss Fiske, entitled "Goldfish," was shown in the Carnegie Institute's International Exhibition a year ago, where it attracted much attention on account of its unusual qualities of light and color. At this time it was purchased by a private collector.

The painting by Mrs. Johanson is a double portrait showing a little brother and sister seated almost back to back. It is extremely interesting as an example of child portraiture, picturesque, vital and altogether engaging.



GOLDFISH

GERTRUDE FISKE

AN EXAMPLE OF

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PAINTING



VIRGINIA AND STANTON

M. JEAN McLANE

PRESENTED BY THE FRIENDS OF AMERICAN ART TO

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO